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Critics'

THEATRE REVIEWS

INDEX

Stage Play	Pages
*Arsenic and Old Lace	417, 418, 419, 420
Boudoir	388, 389, 390
Boys and Girls Together	475, 476, 477
Brooklyn Biarritz	370, 371, 372
Cabin in the Sky	463, 464, 465
*Charley's Aunt	469, 470, 471
*Claudia	378, 379, 380, 381
*Corn Is Green (The)	454, 455, 456
Cream in the Well (The)	404, 405, 406, 407
*Crazy With the Heat	410, 411, 412
*Doctor's Dilemma (The)	364, 365, 366, 367
Eight O'Clock Tuesday	424, 425, 426, 427
First Stop to Heaven	427, 428, 429
Five Alarm Waltz	358, 359, 360
*Flight to the West	434, 435, 436
Flying Gerardos (The)	437, 438, 439
Gabrielle	346, 347, 348
George Washington Slept Here	466, 467, 468
*Hellzapoppin	495, 496, 497
Hold on to Your Hats	481, 482, 483
It Happens on Ice	472, 473, 474
*Revised 1941 Edition	340
*Johnny Belinda	478, 479, 480
*Lady in the Dark	400, 401, 402, 403
Lady Who Came to Stay (The)	430, 431, 432, 433

Stage Play	Pages
Liberty Jones	391, 392, 393, 394
*Life With Father	489, 490, 491
*Louisiana Purchase	484, 485, 486
*Man Who Came to Dinner (The)	492, 493, 494
*Meet the People	440, 441
*Mr. and Mrs. North	413, 414, 415, 416
*My Fair Ladies	353, 354, 355
*My Sister Eileen	445, 446, 447
*Native Son	349, 350, 351, 352
†*Night Before Christmas	334, 335, 336
Night of Love	421, 422, 423
*Old Acquaintance	448, 449, 450
*Out of the Frying Pan	381, 382, 383, 384
*Pal Joey	442, 443, 444
*Panama Hattie	460, 461, 462
Popsy	385, 386
Retreat to Pleasure	451, 452, 453
*Separate Rooms	487, 488
Talley Method (The)	372, 373, 374, 375
Tanyard Street	395, 396, 397
They Walk Alone	361, 362, 363
*Tobacco Road	498, 499, 500
Twelfth Night	457, 458, 459
*Watch on the Rhine	341, 342, 343, 344
Your Loving Son	338, 339

**Asterisks indicate shows scheduled to play during the week of April 14th, 1941.*
†"The Night Before Christmas" opened Thursday, April 10th, at the Morosco Theatre.

THEATRE REVIEWS IS A COMPLETE GUIDE AND RECORD TO THE NEW YORK SHOWS

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NEW YORK POST
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK NEWSPAPER "PM"
NEW YORK TIMES
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK WORLD-TELEGRAM
NEW YORK JOURNAL AND AMERICAN

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"The Night Before Christmas"

Reprinted from NEW YORK JOURNAL AND AMERICAN, *April 11, 1941*

'The Night Before Christmas' Staged

Play Centers Upon Situation of Crooks Tunneling Way From a Luggage Shop Into Next Door Bank

By JOHN ANDERSON

THOUGH Laura and S. J. Perelman have hit upon a funny idea in "The Night Before Christmas" they seem to have done nothing more with it at the Morosco than keep the curtain up for three acts and let the audience down. When such well known humorists fail to be funny at such length the matter becomes not only regrettable but slightly embarrassing. It would have been kinder all around, I suppose, if the First Night audience had just tip-toed out last night pretending that it had to see a man about a gag.

The idea that the Perelmans have hit upon (but with the delicate blows of a sledge hammer) is the scheme of a gang of crooks to buy a Sixth ave. luggage shop next door to a bank, and tunnel through to the vaults. They plan to do this on Christmas Eve when, according to reports, everything is quieter than an audience that isn't laughing at the jokes.

As a plot scheme this has obvious points but the trouble at the Morosco is not that they are obvious but that they are simply not developed. We see the crooks insulting customers just to be rid of them; we see them shying away from the chatty neighborhood shopkeepers for fear of detection and we watch their difficulties not only with other gangsters chiselling in on the job, but with the mechanics of knocking a hole in the bank without attracting attention.

Should Be Funny

Such goofy ideas certainly ought to be funny and they ought to lead to situations that should be not only tense but uproarious.

The chief reason why all this preparation never explodes into real merriment is, I think, that the Perelmans have treated their material as comedy instead of farce, that they have taken too much time to sketch in the characters, and slowed up the whole thing with sidelights and sub-plots and long winded conversations that turn out to be just so much wet fuse in a play that is bound to be snappy or nothing.

To add to their difficulties the authors never succeed in making the characters interesting in themselves, except in the case of the gloomy jeweler from across the avenue whose performance, by the infallible Louis Sorin, certainly takes its share of the credit.

Shaky Climax

The climax came off so shakily that I wasn't sure whether the crooks had blown out the bank's wall or merely a circuit on the Morosco switchboard and the fact that they had blasted their way into a delicatessen instead of the vault seemed almost too true to be funny.

Taking it as written for comedy Romney Brent has directed it adroitly at the speed the authors have set on a locked accelerator, and though his own comic gifts as an actor are incontestable they cannot, from the director's bench, put laughter into an inert script. Most of the preformances, especially those of Ruth Weston, John Ravold and George Mathews, appeared to be hedged in by the material, willing but wasted.

For a play that never seemed to get started I thought it would never end.

Reprinted from NEW YORK TIMES, *April 11, 1941*

On 'The Night Before Christmas' the Perelmans Crack Safes and Jokes in Sixth Avenue

By BROOKS ATKINSON

CONSIDER these remarks as written in heart's blood. For Laura and S. J. Perelman have stuffed a number of funny ideas into "The Night Before Christmas," which was acted at the Morosco last evening, but they have drawn an incomplete comedy out of it. Since Mr. Perelman is one of the most insane wags of his time, and his wife must be slightly mad at least by association, it would be a service to humanity to find out why their Sixth Avenue scuffle is not one of the most hilarious escapades of the season. Perhaps the narrative is too episodic and truncated. Perhaps some of the casting is wrong or Romney Brent's direction lacks momentum. Although this column has recognized the symptoms before, it has not yet diagnosed the disease scientifically and is not prepared to publish a cure in this morning's newspaper.

• • •

But the facts are something like this: Two safe-crackers with merry dispositions discover a languid trunk-and-bag store in Sixth Avenue next door to an old-fashioned bank. They buy the store with a pompous flourish and begin drilling at leisure through the cellar wall toward the vault next door during the happy Yuletide. Being strictly professional men, they quarrel over the best methods of procedure, regard leather-goods customers as annoying intruders, become more and more involved with professional associates from institutions of correction all over the country and just before they crack the safe they unexpectedly pull off a strictly legitimate business deal that utterly confuses them.

All this skulduggery is stirred up with some of the most flamboyant jargon ever written by mischief scribblers, and it mixes up normal neighborhood life in Sixth Avenue with grand larceny in a humorously resentful style. Foolish playgoers are likely to laugh their silly heads off at isolated sequences of conversation and incidents in the story. But, alas, "The Night Before Christmas" never accumulates a story that develops out of normal life into comic fantastification. It never carries over from one dazed lunacy to the next. At the end you are left with a vexed impression that the Perelmans' show ought to be but isn't outrageously funny.

• • •

A number of actors work very hard without much unanimity to make their parts comic. George Mathews is a safe-cracker of gigantic lack of intellect, which is amusing. As an escaped convict with a fine sense of professional ethics, Harry Bratsburg is dynamic. Phyllis Brooks introduces a suave blonde with criminal tendencies, and Ruth Weston, Louis Sorin and George Petrie play character parts with flavor and liveliness. It is to be feared that Forrest Orr's master mind is too diffuse and general to be crack-brained in the best Perelman style, and the best part comes to little for that reason.

Even lunatic comedies have to proceed with a certain logic. Is that what is wrong with "The Night Before Christmas"? Could be.

Reprinted from
NEW YORK NEWSPAPER "PM"
April 11, 1941

Robbing a Bank Is Terribly Dull

By LOUIS KRONENBERGER

POSSIBLY *Arsenic and Old Lace* is to blame. Possibly its waggish homicidal maniacs have killed my taste for clean, wholesome things in humor like last night's bank robbers. At any rate, though their little pranks with revolvers and nitroglycerine might once have had a certain lift, last night they seemed prosier than cream of wheat.

Somehow things have conspired against the Perelmans in their farce about two crooks who buy a rundown Sixth Avenue luggage shop in order to work through from its cellar to an adjoining bank vault. The situation, of having to tend shop upstairs while frantically drilling away downstairs, if not exactly inspired, is at least no humdrum. Abetted by the well-known lunacy of the S. J. Perelman imagination, it would seem ample to make for an entertaining evening. But somehow *The Night Before Christmas* rambles and repeats itself without ever becoming very funny.

For one thing, it can never shake off the deadly dullness of its first act. For another, it never catches the true spirit of farce—possibly because it is directed throughout as though the luggage shop were a funeral parlor. But beyond all that, what fun there is, is limited to brief moments rather than whole scenes, to wacky curtains rather than extended situations, to customers who pop in for a moment rather than to the two crooks who stick around for three entire acts.

As the less dapper of the crooks—which is to say as a full-sized gorilla—George Mathews is very amusing, and Ruth Weston and Louis Sorin are as helpful as the direction permits them to be. The rest of the cast was merely slow-footed. On the whole, *The Night Before Christmas* seemed more like The Night Before Good Friday—and not just because that's when it opened.

"The Night Before Christmas"

Reprinted from NEW YORK DAILY NEWS, *April 11, 1941*

Cops and Robbers Enliven "The Night Before Christmas"

"The Night Before Christmas," comedy by Laura and S. J. Perelman. Produced by Courtney Burr at the Morosco Theatre, New York, April 10, 1941.

★ ★

By BURNS MANTLE

I HAVE an idea "The Night Before Christmas," shown at the Morosco Theatre last night, would make a pretty good Gradé B motion picture. It is another of the cops and robbers series, and the Perelmans, Laura and S. J., have provided it with fairly workable and entirely flexible plot.

The story—and if you've heard it before don't try to stop me, because I'll not be here—the story is of the band of bank robbers who move in next door to the bank and start to chisel their way into the money vaults.

The leader of the mob is the suave and superior old boy with the graying hair and the impressive facade. "Wall Street lost a valuable man the day I entered reform school" he assures you.

The lad with the drill is the ignorant toughie with the comic slant on life and property rights.

Denny's Decision

There is also a touch of romance. Denny is a fair beauty who wears sables and silver foxes and has a new hair-do whenever she needs one.

Denny may have started as a gun moll, but she decides to go straight the night before Christmas because the good looking pharmacist from the corner drug store asks her to. What the heck? Denny is tired of clothes and diamond watches anyway.

Everything is set for surprises one, two and three when the real leader breaks out of the Big House and comes down to embarrass his old pals.

There isn't anything wrong with "The Night Before Christmas" except that it is too obviously artificial to be as amusing as expected.

It is a good practice comedy. I'm glad the Perelmans got it out of their systems. Now they are likely to settle down and write a better piece. They have a good sense of patter dialogue and a good working sense of character.

Better Luck Next Time

As soon as they begin to create in place of to copy comedy patterns they are likely to do something worth while and that is what the theatre needs.

The actors do as well as could be expected. Ruth Weston has a nice, new blonde wig and a short part as a willing widow. Phyllis Brooks decorates prettily the role of the girl the druggist reforms without the use of opiates.

Forrest Orr is the suave one, George Mathews his comedy foil. John Ravold, Louis Sorin and several others do their bits creditably.

The setting is a realistic Sixth Avenue luggage shop with nothing missing but the "Going Out of Business" sign. Boris Aronson designed it.

Romney Brent directed. It is as I say, a good practice job. Romney will also do better his next time up.

'THE NIGHT BEFORE CHRISTMAS'

A comedy in three acts by Laura and S. J. Perelman; directed by Romney Brent; setting by Boris Aronson. Presented at the Morosco Theater on April 10, 1941, by Courtney Burr. The cast:

Madame Rochelle	Ruth Weston
Bigelow	John Ravold
Endicott	St. Claire Bayfield
Sam Bachrach	Louis Sorin
Denny Costello	Phillis Brooks
Flora	Shelley Winter
Byron Schofield	Herbert Nelson
Fred Finch	George Petrie
Otis J. Faunce	Forrest Orr
Ruby	George Mathews
A Window Shopper	Ellen Hall
A Casualty	Frank Kreigenhofer Jr.
A Fuss-Budget	John Junior
A Sophomore	Carl Gose
Smitty	Owen Martin
Gentleman in Black	Charles Furcolowe
Policemen	Marshall Bradford, Charles Holden
Victor Immature	Dean Norton
A Paranoiac	Jean Norwood
A Moviegoer	Muriel Campbell
Aspinwall	William David
Truckman	Pete Cusanelli
Leo	Harry Bratsburg
The Shield	Donald McClelland
Sergeant	Lew Eckles

Reprinted from NEW YORK WORLD-TELEGRAM, *April 11, 1941*

The Night Before Christmas Has Its Hilarious Moments

By SIDNEY B. WHIPPLE

TWO comic burglars, a beautiful gun moll, a hophead and an escaped killer from Sing Sing take over a Sixth Ave. luggage shop in Laura and S. J. Perelman's new farce, The Night Before Christmas, and are blasted out of it by the premature discharge of nitroglycerine with which they had intended to hoist the bank next door. The gun moll reforms and marries a soda jerker, the more engaging criminals escape under escort of a fake cop and the removal of the more sinister characters goes far toward achieving Mr. Moses' cherished dream of beautifying the midtown boulevard.

There is in this new play some of the light humor for which Mr. Perelman's essays have long been noted, and many of the lines produce well-earned gusts of laughter. It is, on the other hand, a loosely and carelessly constructed farce that never succeeds in overcoming the implausibility of its situations. Some of the cast, especially in the minor roles, hamper the action by their inexperience in the brisk type of comedy the play demands, and even so expert an actress as Miss Ruth Weston is lost in the banality of a stock character.

• • •

The authors have created two highly amusing figures, however. One is a glib confidence man of the old J. Rufus Wallingford type who is the front for the criminal gang; the other is a dumb and pleasant pluguly whose specialty is tunneling into bank vaults and who is shocked at the unesthetic approach via the nitroglycerine route. The pleasantest part of the evening's entertainment is afforded when these two hard-working crooks are called away from their excavations in the cellar leading to the bank to wait on the customers in the shop they have acquired above it.

I am inclined to place the blame for the long stretches of dullness that inflict the entire first act and parts of the third upon the direction of Romney Brent and the ineffectiveness of some of the actors rather than upon Mr. Perelman's lines. Certainly it is not the fault of Forrest Orr, who labors well and valiantly and who brought considerable hilarity and some credibility into the role of Otis J. Faunce, breeziest of the swindlers. Nor is it the fault of George Mathews, whose disarming countenance is always an asset to such roles as prize fighters, bullies or cauliflowered stevedores, and who is one of the most genial tough guys on the stage today.

• • •

The proper place for the beautiful Phyllis Brooks, on the other hand, is in a show like Panama Hattie, in which she appeared earlier this season. Her appearance in The Night Before Christmas was one of the things that lent such an air of impossibility to the proceedings. Why would she have wasted her attentions on a dopey, lettuce-and-mayonnaise engineer from the neighborhood drug store, when she could just as easily walk over to the Stork Club and knock over a South American coffee king?

A great deal of the humor in the new play revolves around the strange patois of the underworld and the use the authors make of it, and when an attempt is made to turn rational or solemn or sentimental the play falls flat on its nose. It is, in fact, the sane and normal characters who move and talk so woodenly and seem so unreal.

Altogether The Night Before Christmas provides a small portion of hilarity, sandwiched in between layers of dullness.